

Spiritual Detergent  
(Lev. 5:17-26; Ps. 51)

An attractive, well-built man emerges from a swim in the ocean. Watching him intently from the beach is a voluptuous woman who likes what she sees. They exchange glances. She observes approvingly as the man, looking out on the water, pulls up his jeans. Anticipating an encounter, she poses provocatively to draw his attention. As she sees him putting his shirt, she takes in his tanned and toned torso. As he turns to meet her inviting glance, her eyes fix on his neck and they grow wide—the handsome man she has been surveying with such appetite is wearing a clerical collar. He is a priest. Smoothly, confidently, he comes over to her and touches her—intimately, delicately, on her forehead, where, with the condensation from her soda can, he places the sign of the cross. This brief video, with the headline “A Lenten Meditation” recently made the rounds, amusing all the clergy I know. Indeed, it depicted an opportunity, but not the kind of opportunity the sensuous woman had in mind. Things are not always what they seem. For a change, seduction gives way to purification.

Purification was once more explicit, easier and, well, cleaner. In Leviticus, we read of an elaborate ritual process with all the proper people and animals in place. The Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, comes from the root *karov*, to be close. In the Hebrew Bible, the act of bringing a sacrifice closed the distance between the sinner and God. The cleansing that ensued was physical and palpable. Yet these rituals of purification were paradoxical--in order to bring purity back into the world, the sacrificial

act itself was messy and bloody. Biblical Scholar Jacob Milgrom resolves this paradox in a fascinating way. He understands the korban-- the sacrifice brought to foster closeness to God-- as purifying not the sinner. Rather, it purifies the the sacred space of the Tabernacle, polluted through the damaging consequences of the sin. Even an accidental transgression leaves the community's sacred space in a state of contamination, which must be quickly reversed. Dr. Milgrom maintains that it is not the transgressor himself who undergoes a rite of purification; his remorse at the discovery of his act is enough. What needs to be purified is the space of the Tabernacle; hence the [ritual] calls for sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice seven times "before the Lord in front of the curtain of the Shrine" and "on the horns of the altar of aromatic incense, which is in the Tent of Meeting, before the Lord (Leviticus 4:6-7)." This sevenfold sprinkled blood, Milgrom coins as, "... tritural detergent employed by the priest to purge the sanctuary of the impurities inflicted upon it by the offerer of the sacrifice (p. 256)."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Milgrom teaches that sacrifice is ritual detergent. Purification could be seen, and freshness brought into the place of holiness in the same way that today, we feel lighter and cleaner when we walk into a clean house. Cleaning has tangible repercussions. In the absence of the rituals of the Temple, without their earthiness,

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<sup>1</sup> Chancellor Ismar Schorsch, Jewish Theological Seminary, Shabbat Zachor, Vayikra, 5755, March 1995, quoting Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, Anchor Bible Commentary to Leviticus, 1991 <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/parashah/5755/vayikra.shtml>

their concreteness, their explicit directions, we need to institute other ways to purify, other means to know that our desire for atonement is recognized, that our yearning for a fresh start can be addressed. At this season--for Christians, the Lenten Season anticipating Easter, and for Jews, preparing for Passover—both communities are engaged in our respective rituals of cleansing.

For Jews, that clean house is not theoretical. We are commanded to remove all chametz, all leavening, which translates into a lot of elbow grease. Purging the house of all crumbs and dirt, spring-cleaning takes on religious proportions. In the Chassidic tradition, chametz is understood to be that which puffs us up, so not only crumbs, but also egos need to be cleansed and purified. No doubt, it is possible to clean mindlessly; but the intention behind the obligation occasions reflection. Similarly, for Christians, by intentionally forfeiting a designated desire for Lent, occasions reflection on what that sacrifice points to. Our religious traditions have created rituals of spiritual detergent—to assist us in returning to a path that leads to reconciliation with the Eternal.

For some of us, the way we have strayed is incremental and nearly unconscious. But for some of us, there was a specific act, a distance we traveled from God that made it seem nearly impossible to come close again. In Psalm 51, part of the Lenten liturgy, we have such an act. It is not often that we are given a context for a psalm, but here, we do. King David had observed Bathsheva after

bathing (perhaps as our sensuous woman in the Lenten video hoped to be observed), and he desired her. That she was married did not dissuade him. He had the power to fulfill his desires. However, their consequences were not totally in his power. When Bathsheva became pregnant, David tried to have it appear that Uriah, her husband, was the father, and when that failed, he placed Uriah on the frontlines, so he would be killed in battle. Nathan, David's trusted advisor, rebuked him and according to tradition, this psalm is David's cry for repentance.

The psalm begins " A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bathsheva."

"Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity  
and purify me of sin.

Purge me with hyssop till I am pure

Wash me till I am whiter than snow

Fashion a pure heart

Do not cast me out of Your presence or

Take Your holy spirit away from me."

David wants spiritual detergent, but not by means of sacrifice. Like us, he seeks another measure to know that he has been purified. It was through his body that he sinned; it is through his body that he seeks purification. It is through his

mouth, his lips, his words, his praise and his heart that his repentance is achieved.

Listen to King David's words:

“O Eternal open my lips and let my mouth declare Your praise

You do not want me to bring sacrifices.

You do not deserve burnt offerings;

True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit

God You will not despise

A contrite and crushed heart.”

This is not only a Lenten psalm. In Jewish tradition, Psalm 51 is called “The Chapter of Repentance” Rabbenu Yonah, explains that its contents are the foundations of the principles of atonement, and if one wishes to repent for his sins, its words are a fitting prayer.<sup>2</sup> Changing how we behave, how we live, may not be as concrete as sacrifices, but when it is our very bodies that effect the change, they can transform us as powerfully as sacrifices.

Sometimes we are washed clean when we are bathed in the waters of love and caring, when we are believed in and encouraged. Sometimes we live up to the glorious confidence that has been placed within us. But sometimes, spiritual detergent is found in adversity. Sometimes we need a jump-start in order to find our way home. I heard

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbenu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah 1:23

recently of such an occasion for purification. This spiritual detergent had elements of love, but many more of hardship.

As a middle school student, Ashleigh Rehs was depressed, isolated, and nearly flunking out of school. Her teachers didn't know what to do with her. Then her mother, Valerie Imdorf woke up one day and couldn't see out of one of her eyes. She was eventually diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Upon absorbing how her life would change, Valerie prayed "Lord, if this is what I am supposed to have, than I am trusting that you have a reason for this. Someone's going to be blessed. You're going to use me somehow." Never in her wildest dreams did she think that the blessing was going to be her own daughter. Ashleigh, the oldest child, became her mother's primary caregiver. As her mother's condition deteriorated, Ashleigh was the one to give the IV infusions and injections, coordinate her doctor's visits, to keep up her mother's spirits, to take care of her brother and sister. One might expect that with her added responsibilities at home, Ashleigh's attention to school would diminish still further. But the opposite took place. She went from failure to achievement. Now 15, Ashleigh's experience led her to want to be a neuroscientist to look for a cure for MS.<sup>3</sup> Aimlessness led to purpose. Ashleigh was tempered in the fires of crisis, washed clean in the waters of trial. Her spiritual detergent was abrasive, even as it renewed her life.

As this story teaches us, sometimes we are washed clean by the adversity that comes to us. But we are also washed clean by adversity that we willingly take on,

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<sup>3</sup>"Caregiver Role Brings Purpose-And Risk-to Kids," "Morning Edition" National Public Radio, Thursday, March 23, 2006

adversity in the form of a struggle against injustice. Unlike David, who asks God to cleanse him, who says:

“Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and purify me of sin.

Purge me with hyssop till I am pure

Wash me till I am whiter than snow”, the prophet Isaiah insists that God wants **us** to do the washing. He prophesies that no sacrifices, regardless of how properly and carefully they are offered, will be accepted if the hands that offer them ignore injustice.

Listen to Isaiah’s words:

“Wash yourselves clean

Cease to do evil:

Learn to do good

Devote yourselves to justice:

Aid the wronged,

Uphold the rights of the orphan;

Defend the cause of the widow.” (Is. 1:16:17)

The spiritual detergent of Isaiah’s prophecy cleanses us by propelling us into the fray. It is not enough to live without sinfulness, if we are living in a world awash in sin and apathy. We wash ourselves clean when we devote ourselves to justice. Today, as in Isaiah’s time, injustice abounds—Darfur, the aftermath of

Katrina, the war in Iraq, to name but a few. In this past week, the justice-seeking most in evidence in our country crying out for hands and hearts has been on behalf of immigrants. “Aid the wronged,” Isaiah teaches. Illegal immigration is presently a civil matter. But the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act which passed in the House of Representatives makes it a felony to be in this country without documentation, making no distinction between hardworking people and rapists or murderers. Furthermore, this legislation criminalizes not only undocumented workers, but also those who would provide health and welfare to them. This mean-spirited House bill and some concomitant versions in the Senate foster a mentality of divisiveness, of “us versus them.” Not surprising, even legal immigrants who have been polled line up against the bill as well. They say that the present animus toward undocumented immigrants spills over to them as well. It’s hard to distinguish who is us, amidst a culture of us versus them.

About twenty years ago, at a Hillel conference, we were treated to a performance by the son of a Hillel rabbi-- folksinger and labor activist Si Kahn. For years I remembered the song he sang about how many times his grandfather, “crossed the border” Lucky for you, I’m not going to sing it, but I’d like to share the lyrics--



As a young man he traveled through Russia  
With his uncle and two other singers  
But they drafted him into the Army  
And he had to escape from there  
When the guards that they'd bribed at the border  
Started shooting at him and the others  
They turned back, but he kept on going  
And kept going for ninety-two years

We are crossing the border

We are crossing the border

We are crossing the border

Come go, come go, come go

He got passage to Nova Scotia  
Was married in Manitoba  
He shoveled dirt for the Canada Pacific

Carried hod when they built the hotel

Land was a dollar an acre

But he was too careful to buy it

So when they found oil on it

He still had the story to tell

Then he moved down south of the border

By the mills on the Merrimack River

He pumped gas and kept store for a living

Raised up his daughter and sons

He's sit at the head of the table

Drinking Haig & Haig pinch bottle whiskey

And I'd wonder how someone so gentle

Could have done all the things that he'd done

He got old and he lived by the ocean

I went with my children to see him

He stared through the cataracts at them

But I think that he saw them just right

We buried him up in New England

And maybe that's home for the wanderer

But home is where the heart is

And my heart's with my Zayde tonight

Si Kahn, Copyright Joe Hill Music

The immigrants in the sights of today's bill speak Spanish rather than Yiddish or Russian, but they too are working hard, raising children, and telling stories to their grandkids. Just as Si Kahn, an American labor organizer and folksinger is descended from a border crosser, so are nearly all of us. Let us remember that there is no us vs. them. There is only us. Let us seek a solution borne of empathy and respect. Let our hearts be with our Zayde's, with our Abuelos, with our grandparents, today, and let us wash ourselves clean by doing justice.

At this season of cleansing, let us find the spiritual detergent that will refine our souls and our lives. Let us find our way back to God, back to purity and back to justice. May your Lenten Season be reflective and cleansing. May your Easter be filled with renewal and hope.